The New “Decline of the Family”

One well-known sociologist whispered to another sharing the podium at a session on family change, “I have to cook dinner every Thursday, and I hate it.” A man in the audience complained during the discussion that followed that his wife “wouldn’t let him” do the laundry, although he had volunteered. No doubt many men have wondered when, if ever, it is appropriate to hold the door open for a woman. Clearly men, including those who study the family, feel some anxiety about male and female relationships, particularly about a man’s role in the home.

This anxiety may be the reason most male scholars ignore the changes that are underway in the home, even though they write extensively about the rapid changes that have occurred since the 1950s in almost every other dimension of family life. This writing is often pessimistic—greatly concerned about family instability and the risk of population decline—because of changes in marriage, fertility, and divorce that they link to the increase in cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage and most dramatically and ubiquitously, to the growth in paid employment among women, particularly married mothers of very young children (Espenshade, 1985; Westoff, 1986; Bumpass, 1987).

But their explanations are incomplete, for what is at the heart of these changes is a restructuring of male-female relationships, both at work and at home, in which men are increasingly expecting their wives to share in economic responsibilities and women are increasingly expecting help with domestic tasks. They appear to believe instead that the only way to ensure that women stay married and raise two or more children is to turn the clock back to the time before this restructuring took hold; to go back to the 1950s by making women dependent once again on male incomes. They reason that
as women act increasingly like men by focusing on their careers, no one will be left to raise the children, maintain networks of family relationships, and manage the home, because most men today are uncomfortable doing these things. In studying the transformation of the workplace as women increasingly join men there, many social scientists assume the home will be abandoned.

Male scholars are not the only ones feeling anxiety about rapid change in family structure. New generations of children are growing up experiencing the pains of family revolution as their parents divorce and remarry or opt out of the fray to stand alone as single parents. The norms and expectations underlying married life in the 1950s—those "rules" that told couples what to expect—are no longer valid. Marriages formed under the old rules are being dissolved; new ones formed during the confusion of the present are not holding up very well, either. As a result, the children of divorce are increasingly choosing not to marry. They are cohabiting or living outside of familylike relationships altogether, afraid to risk such loss again, at least until it is clear what the new rules are (Thornton, 1990).

The option to remain unmarried has become increasingly attractive, and not simply because of the growing confusion about marriage. While female independence has been upsetting the rules of family life, a separate family revolution has also been in progress. A new alternative to family life—nonfamily living—has become available for the first time.

This revolution began in the 1940s with an increase in residential independence for the widowed elderly. With the advent and expansion of Social Security and the development of private pension plans, retired men and women—including women who had never worked outside the home—had enough income to maintain themselves independently, with no need to move in with their grown children. This "family change" has always been seen as benign, even welcome.

Then, beginning seriously in the 1960s, nonfamily living spread to young adults, who discovered that they now had the option of living independently before marriage. Only a generation ago, almost all unmarried people lived either with their parents, their married children (if they had them), or their married siblings. Most of those who did not have access to the homes of near kin boarded with other families rather than having their own home or apartment. They were either dependents or outsiders in someone else's home. The rise in nonfamily living has meant that for the first time the privacy, independence, and authority of having one's own place does not require marriage. The general scholarly view of this phenomenon (e.g., Michael et al., 1980) is that if all unmarried people had enough money, they would choose to be freed from the restrictions of dependency and live alone. Few consider that there might be some living arrangement better than living alone, that in an equal relationship—whether of roommates or of those with family ties—
people can find companionship while respecting one another's privacy and independence.

Thus, the family is undergoing two revolutions in the latter part of the twentieth century: one outside it, in the rise of nonfamily living; and the other inside it, as relationships between men and women change under pressure from the sex-role revolution. These are not by any means the first revolutions in family life. Another dramatic transformation of family life occurred in the nineteenth century when urbanization and industrialization took the production of many goods and services out of the home. As a result, men left the farm to earn money to buy these goods and services, leading to the physical separation of men's and women's productive work and to the notion of their lives as "separate spheres."

When central heating arrived, and families no longer needed to spend their leisure hours together in one room, like a long car ride, for all but the warmest months of the year, the transformation may have been even greater. And when the invention of the telephone meant that neighbors and family could be counted on not to drop in unexpectedly, the level of privacy and isolation of the American family increased to unprecedented levels. Families no longer marry off their children by age order so that younger daughters need not wait for their older sisters to find a match; and fathers no longer can expect their sons to work alongside them and eventually take over their trades or their places on the family farm. Hence, "the family" has changed repeatedly. But family change has always led to "new families"—in some ways better and in some ways worse than those they succeeded. At least this was always the case for families in the past; the expectations—or rules—changed, and families changed with them. But what about changes in current rules? Will they also lead to "new families"? Or will the option of nonfamily living bring about "the end of the family"?

Hear again what family demographers, sociologists, and economists are saying. They define marriage as a relationship based on trade. "Marriage is an exchange of female services for male incomes" (Bumpass, 1987); "... [until now] when a man and woman married, the husband specialized in market work and the wife in home production, and then they traded" (Espenshade, 1985). Hence, "with men and women earning the same income ... what then is the point of marriage?" (Westoff, 1986). Missing is any consideration of love as a basis for marriage, companionship as a basis for living together, or shared parenthood.

These scholars do not consider that a relationship can provide benefits, such as closeness and companionship, comfort in difficulty, and sharing of happy times, beyond the exchange of goods and services. They conclude that the economic basis of family relationships is crumbling, as women increasingly support themselves. By implication, they are arguing that if women have enough money, they will live alone. Their argument is the same as the
one given for the rise of nonfamily living, in which living in families is seen as less desirable than living alone, not only for the unmarried, whose only other option is thought to be dependency on another's household, but for all women.

In many ways, this may not be an unfair description of many traditional marriages, in which the quality of the marital relationship is subordinate (for both partners) to their economic interdependence. Even at its height in the 1950s, romantic love as a basis for marriage, or "companionate marriage" as we will call it (Burgess and Locke, 1945), was little more than a myth, because such a marriage is founded not only on love but also on equality and mutual respect between partners. Women with no recent (or any) work experience or marketable skills have difficulty being equal partners in such a relationship unless they are extraordinarily desirable in the remarriage market.

Companionate marriage focuses on the quality of the relationship between the partners. It emphasizes interpersonal closeness, trust, communication, and mutuality as the foundation of a mature, romantic love. However, such a relationship is difficult to maintain when a wife and mother has few options for support except to find a "better" husband. Men can and do leave an alcoholic or abusive spouse (or even an unpleasant one) and can support themselves alone and expect to remarry. But women cannot leave their husbands as easily. Since many women cannot support themselves, all they can do is hope the alcoholism or abuse ends. Women have needed to please in a way men have not. Hence, women found they had to lie—about their grades, their tennis skills, their orgasms, and how they spent the housekeeping money—rather than communicate honestly, as required in a companionate marriage. So in many traditional marriages, women have in fact been dependents in their own homes, in many ways like unmarried children, parents, and siblings before they had the resources to live alone.

Married women have also had full responsibility for managing the home and doing many of the chores that, despite all the modern conveniences of washers and vacuums, take many hours a week. In many ways, women's domestic responsibilities have increased, since they have taken on the chores that men once performed, while their husbands work longer hours, commute more, and spend more leisure time away from home. They have taken on their children's chores with the expansion of education. The academic year is longer and the years of schooling necessary to function successfully as an adult have increased. Our conception of childhood has transformed the "useful child" into the "useless child" (Zelizer, 1985) and in the process, has created daughters who learn few household skills as children, and sons who learn fewer still.

Hence, living alone is not a great loss for many women, compared with a traditional marriage based on exchange (assuming they can maintain themselves financially); they have fewer rooms to clean and people to cook for,
balanced against the loss of their partner's income. But what of young men? Does the same logic imply that if they all had enough money, and could purchase domestic services in the market, they, too, would live alone? Have they only married to get someone else to do the housekeeping? If so, the revolution that has created privacy and dignity for those living outside of families may well be the last family revolution, and the recent pessimistic scholarship about the family may turn out to be correct.

We do not think so. If the revolution in employment means that women no longer have to marry, it also means that the marriages they do contract are now voluntary in a way that was never before possible. Men and women have the opportunity to create "new families." They can do so by becoming partners again, sharing in home- and family-based tasks, as they did before men's work moved out of the home and they followed it into the factories and offices of the modern economy. The "no families" created by the rise in nonfamily living should not be as attractive as a companionate marriage. Most young adults can develop such a relationship if they work together not only to earn the resources to make a home but also to create family relationships and a physical environment that can provide them with satisfaction and beauty in their domestic lives.

"New families" are only possible, however, if men will share in family work more directly—including performing household tasks. A rewarding family environment rests on careful coordination and hard work, and women are beginning to resent having to take it all on, alone. If women are now refusing to marry, it may not be because they no longer "need" the earnings of men, as the family demographers think. It is true that their earnings can finally "buy" them out of bad marriages. However, there is no basis either in economic theory or in social psychology for expecting that women or men should use their earnings to forgo a good marriage with love, companionship, sharing, and the continuity of children and grandchildren. It is likely that women are, instead, deferring marriage, looking for an appropriate partner as most men and women always have, but are taking longer to do it. They are likely to have become much choosier because they fear the double burden of work and home—not just because they can now "afford" to be choosy. And they can wait in independence and privacy, living in their own place, rather than remaining daughters in their parents' homes.

To learn whether this is a realistic prospect—to find out whether "new families" or "no families" are more likely to result from the changes currently underway in family life—requires systematic study. We know much less about how things work in families than we do about physical and biological systems, political systems, or even economic systems. There is an enormous need for evidence about the way people function in families and outside them, and what factors affect our family lives. This book is meant to contribute to this task. Our results cannot be definitive. Predicting the future is always
risks, whether for families or the weather. Most of our analyses do not even focus directly on change, as we discuss in more detail in chapter 3. What we try to do, in a scholarly and systematic way, is examine the family patterns that have emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and use these patterns to see what they portend for the future. The shattering of the family stability of the 1950s and early 1960s by the revolutions in divorce and in gender roles and the emergence of nonfamily living arrangements in early adulthood made the decades that followed critical for the future of the family. The young adults that we study are the first of whom a large proportion had childhoods disturbed by parental divorce and remarriage, and they are also the first to have started thinking about gender equality in childhood. The factors that influenced their attitudes about their future family lives, the process of marrying and having children, and the division of labor in their homes provide clues to assess the likely direction families will take.

Our view is that children’s experiences in the home shape the families they later form. Factors that increase the involvement of children in household tasks should lead to men who are not tormented by sharing the responsibility with their wives for making dinner. The participation of fathers should make their daughters more optimistic that the “double burden” is not a necessary component of all marriages. Hence, in this study we look not only at the factors that affect the ways in which adults create and maintain families (or instead, lead them away from family living altogether) but also at the factors that might lead to “new families.”

Specifically, this book is a study of the factors influencing the decisions of young women (and young men) to marry (chapter 5), have children, or divorce (chapter 6). As such, it is part of the tradition of studies that have led demographers recently to write pessimistically about the “decline of the family.” But it differs from them, in that it is also a study of the development of egalitarian gender roles (chapter 4), particularly in the home, and the factors influencing the extent to which men and women—and boys and girls—share in its care (chapters 7–10). The critical question is whether these trends in nonmarriage, nonparenthood, and divorce are leading to a future of “no families,” or whether the family can become again a sharing partnership between men, women, and children, and thus ensure its future.